

“Life in a Jar”:

A National History Day Project that Touched the World

Norman Conard

Few had heard of Irena Sendlerowa in 1999. Now, after more than 290 presentations of the student play *Life in a Jar*, as well as a website with high traffic, and worldwide media attention, Irena is known to the world.

High school students from Uniontown in rural Kansas discovered the story of Irena Sendlerowa, a Catholic woman who saved Jewish children during World War II. In the fall of 1999, I encouraged several students to work on a year-long National History Day project—something which would, among other things, extend the boundaries of the classroom to families in the community, contribute to learning history, teach respect and tolerance, and meet our classroom motto, “He who changes one person, changes the world entire.”

Three ninth graders, Megan Felt, Elizabeth Hutton, and Jessica Ripper, and an eleventh grader, Sabrina Murphy, accepted the challenge and decided to enter their project in the National History Day program. I showed them a clipping from a March 1994 issue of *U.S. News and World Report*, which said, “Irena Sendler saved 2,500 children from the Warsaw Ghetto in 1942–43.” The students began their research and looked for primary and secondary sources throughout the year.

Irena Sendler’s Life

Irena Sendler (as she became known), a social worker, believed in standing up for others. Her father, who was a doctor, had inspired her to serve the world. From 1939 to 1942, Irena made false documents for those in danger and worked to rescue children and adults from the Warsaw Ghetto with a network of

25 people. She then joined the Polish resistance movement, *Zegota*. The students learned that Irena Sendler had gone into the Warsaw Ghetto, warned Jewish parents and grandparents that all were going to die in the Ghetto or in death camps, and persuaded them to let her take their children away. She then had to take children past Nazi guards, or use another escape route out of the Ghetto, and then either arrange for their adoption by non-Jewish families, or hide them in convents and orphanages. She made lists of the children’s real names, put the lists in jars, and then buried the jars in a garden so that she would be able to dig them up in the future, find the children, and tell them their real identities. At one point, the Nazis captured Irena and beat her severely, but the Polish Underground bribed a guard to release her. Irena then went into hiding.

From Kansas to the World

The students wrote a National History Day performance (*Life in a Jar*) in which they portrayed the life of Irena Sendler. They later performed this program for numerous clubs and civic groups in the community, around the state of Kansas, all over North America and in Europe (290 presentations as of November 2009). Uniontown, Kansas, had little diversity and no Jewish students in the school district. The community was inspired by the project and sponsored an Irena Sendler Day. The students began to search for

the final resting place of Irena and discovered she was still alive and living in Warsaw, Poland. Even though Irena had received esteemed recognition from Yad Vashem in 1965 and support from the Jewish Foundation for the Righteous in New York City, her story was unknown worldwide. Forty-five years of communism had buried her story, even in her own country.

The students began a correspondence with Irena, who wrote dozens of deeply meaningful letters to them, with such comments as,

My emotion is being shadowed by the fact that my co-workers have all passed on, and these honors fall to me. I can’t find words to thank you, for my own country and the world to know of the bravery of rescuers. Before the day you had written *Life in a Jar*, the world did not know our story; your performance and work is continuing the effort I started over fifty years ago. You are my dearly beloved ones.

The students made a collection of the letters and have shared these documents with universities, historical societies, and the Chicago and New York City Jewish Foundations for the Righteous. Their cause for Irena Sendler became a national cause. The students appeared on C-SPAN, National Public Radio, CBS, CNN, the Today Show, in numerous newspaper articles, including the *Chicago Tribune*, *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times*. They were invited to perform in Washington, D.C., and before a Jewish foundation in New York City. They have



Melissa Query portrays an orphan during a performance in Los Angeles. (Photo by the Milken Family Foundation, 2007)



Jaime Walker portrays a Jewish mother at a Truman Presidential Library performance in Missouri. (Photo by Kenny Felt, 2007)

become knowledgeable on subjects such as the Holocaust, World War II, and the Polish Underground. At least 20 colleges and universities have been using their letters from Irena and their project information in their curricula.

Great emotion pours out of the audience during each presentation. The students took the class motto to heart, and would regularly write on their homework papers such notes as, “I’m changing the world” and “Irena’s story must be told.”

The four original students dreamed of visiting Warsaw, interviewing Irena, her surviving children, and others connected to this story. In January of 2001, they performed before a large school district in a city about 100 miles from our school. A Jewish educator and businessman saw the performance and asked to have lunch with them that day. He told them he would raise the money and send

them to Warsaw, if they would go that spring and bring back her story. Irena was 91 and in poor health. The man raised the money in twenty-four hours.

On May 22, 2001, I traveled with the four students, several parents, and my wife to Warsaw, Poland. They spent time with Irena Sendler and then extended the boundaries of the classroom to the world. The Polish group Children of the Holocaust arranged a meeting between the rescuers and the children saved—the first such meeting in many years. They also met a famous Polish poet who was saved by Irena, and an author of a well-known memoir of the Holocaust who called the students *rescuers of the rescuer*. The Polish press made this story international news.

In 2002, the founders of the project and new students traveled to Poland. They interviewed people connected

to Irena and her story, and visited with Irena on several occasions. They also visited Treblinka and retraced Irena’s steps in the Warsaw Ghetto.

The original students are now in their mid-20s. The four original founders are married, two with children. They continue to present *Life in a Jar*. All of the present students are in college or have graduated.

Many parents and community members are involved in the project. A lady in the community has organized an Irena Sendler Day, and another has organized an Irena Sendler week. The students continue to perform in front of local churches, civic groups, and clubs. *Life in a Jar* has been presented in a number of states and on two summer tours. In November of 2004 and February of 2007, the Milken Family Foundation sponsored *Life in a Jar* in a series of presentations in Los

Maegan Easter, a college junior at Pittsburgh State University, visits Irena Sendler at a Catholic care home in Warsaw, in 2005.



Angeles, and produced a DVD of the play that has been played in over 2,000 schools in the United States and around the world. A teacher's/classroom study guide is also available.

The Jewish community in Kansas City has reached out in a powerful way to involve itself with the project. The community as a whole adopted the project and this courageous woman as a part of the family. The Jacobsons, Krigels and Isenbergs are families who have assisted in many ways. Howard and Ro Jacobson established a scholarship fund for Uniontown students who needed help with college.

In 2005, the group again traveled to Poland for presentations of *Life in a Jar*. An international Irena Sendler Award was started in 2006. The Polish Education Ministry mandated Holocaust Education in Poland, according to a leading scholar, because of Irena Sendler and the *Life in a Jar* project. Irena was also nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007. Schools have been named after her, and a book in Polish and German has been printed. The irenasendler.org website has recorded over 25 million hits

since its student development in 2003.

Epilogue

Irena passed away on May 12, 2008. She was buried in a Warsaw cemetery. Her family and many of the rescued children continue to tell her story of courage and valor. The *Life in a Jar* students continue to share her legacy through the play, the website, through schools and study guides, and world media. The Hallmark Hall of Fame premiered a movie, "The Courageous Heart of Irena Sendler," in the spring of 2009. Hallmark ended the movie by acknowledging the National History Day students from Kansas.

Earlier this year, a venue director who sponsored the *Life in a Jar* play in Daytona Beach wrote us a note commending the project:

On a rainy night, 617 people came to see the play, *Life In a Jar*—a sold out crowd. In fact, 300 people had to be turned away because of the fire code laws. These young people did an incredible job of portraying how the courageous heart of Irena Sendler saved 2,500 Jewish

children. Their acting was superb but, more important, their sincerity shone through. The audience really got the message, that one person definitely can make a difference. It is amazing that in a city of 300 people in Kansas, students from a small public school were the ones who discovered this brave heroine. . . . Throughout this play, the students in their simplicity make you realize that all of us have to have a hand in repairing the world. . . . Young people are our future, and these students exemplify the very best. All I can say is Bravo!....These students exemplify the quote from Anne Frank, who said, 'in spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at Heart.' 🎭

NORMAN CONARD retired from the classroom in 2007 and is the director of the Lowell Milken Education Center in Fort Scott, Kansas (www.lowellmilkencenter.org). The staff of the Center works with students and teachers around the world, developing unsung hero projects teaching respect and understanding for all. The Irena Sendler website is accessible at www.irenasendler.org.